Eventful democratization: why we need methodological pluralism

Della Porta, Donatella

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

EVENTFUL DEMOCRATIZATION: WHY WE NEED METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM[1]

DONATELLA DELLA PORTA

Abstract: A keynote for the *SCOPE 2014: Science of Politics – International Interdisciplinary Conference of Political Research* that took place at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Political Science between 27 and 29 June 2014, this article assesses at theoretical and methodological level the way in which both agency and structure are relevant in social movements, particularly in processes of eventful democratization. Eventful democratization appears as sudden and unexpected, not only to observers or dictators, but also often to the very activists who mobilize against the authoritarian regimes. This difficulty in prediction is linked to agency and contingency: intense protest events are indeed under-determined moments as structural constraints are, if not overcome, at least weakened by the very capacity of mobilization to quickly transform relations. Following the social movement literature, the article focuses particularly on causal mechanisms at collective level, identifying and discussing *relational, cognitive, and emotional* mechanisms.

Keywords: social movements, eventful democratization, agency, structure, causal mechanisms, collective action.

Eventful Democratization: The Methodological Challenges

When moving from structuralist approaches to recognition of the role of agency, analysis of democratization processes have often assumed a strategic action by the various actors involved in the process. A similar approach has also dominated social movement studies, which tended to present social movement as "normal politics". Assumptions of rational action are reflected in the methodological choices in research on the topic.

While also in transition collective action do attempt at strategizing, eventful democratization presents, however, special characteristics that make traditional methodological approaches insufficient. First of all, conditions evolve very quickly in time, making it difficult to single out causes and consequences in fast developing processes. Protest events are in fact 'contentious and potentially subversive practices that challenge normalized

[1] In the keynote speech I report part of the arguments from my *Democratization from Below: Comparing 1989 and 2011*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

practices, modes of causation, or systems of authority' (Beissinger 2002, 14). Protest events might indeed change structures, as they are, in Hannah Arendt's words, 'occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures' (1970, 7). Second, motivations develop in action, rather than being exogenous to the situation. Third, information are difficult to collect on the spot and, given the novelty of the situation, expectations about actors' behaviors are difficult to predict. In fact, transitions from authoritarian rule are illustrations of 'underdetermined social change, of large-scale transformations which occur when there are insufficient structural or behavioral parameters to guide and predict the outcome' (O'Donnell and Schmitter1986, 363).

Breaking with essentialist, deterministic, and structuralist understandings, one should therefore follow Beissinger's (2002) stress on temporality, contextualization, and agency. Agency is therefore to be considered as inherent in the development of structure, and structure as influencing action, at least to a certain extent. As Beissinger observed in his illuminating analysis of the breakdown of the Soviet empire, 'nationalism needs to be understood not only as a cause of action, but also as the product of action. This recursive quality of human action—the fact that action can function as both cause and effect—and the significance of this for the study of nationalism are the central theoretical issues' (Beissinger 2002, 11). A causal analysis, artificially distinguishing dependent and independent variables, risks obscuring this continuous relationship. In Beissinger's words, 'the idea that identities could be defined in the context of agency or that nationalism is both a structured and a structuring phenomenon has not received sufficient attention' (2002, 9).

In parallel, when looking at social movements more in general, we should understand them as both structured and structuring phenomena. They are, that is, both constrained in their action by the context in which they move, but also able, through their action, to change relations among and between actors. As Sewell (1990) has shown in his brilliant analysis of the Bastille takeover, this does not happen only in the long term, but also in the (very) short, *événementiel* one, as events are relational processes in which various actors make choices that are, at least in part, linked to others' expected reactions.

It is therefore important to focus attention on the effects of protest on the social movement itself, by focusing on what, inspired by the historical sociologist William H. Sewell (1996), I have called 'eventful protest' (della Porta 2008). Sewell defines events as a 'relatively rare subclass of happenings that *significantly transform structure*', and an eventful conception of temporality as 'one that takes into account the transformation of structures by events' (Sewell 1996, emphasis added). I suggest that, especially during cycles of protest, some contingent intense events tend to affect the given context by fuelling mechanisms of social change: organizational networks develop; frames are bridged; personal links foster reciprocal trust. In this sense, some protest

events constitute processes during which collective experiences develop through the interactions of different individual and collective actors, taking part with different roles and aims. The event has a transformative effect as it alters the conditions for action 'largely by constituting and empowering new groups of actors or by re-empowering existing groups in new ways' (Sewell 1996, 271). Predictability and structural determinacy are indeed challenged as these protest events set in motion social processes that 'are inherently contingent, discontinuous and open ended' (Sewell 1996, 272).

This bridging of structure and action can be observed through a focus on protest events during episodes of democratization. While the social science literature on first democratization paid attention to long-lasting processes of increase (and sometimes, decrease) in democratic rights, literature on transitology has looked at relatively short moments. Rather than analyzing the long-term effects of these moments as foundational (or not) for democracy, I suggest the importance of reconstructing protests during episodes of democratization, their origins, characteristics, and short-term effects. Besides causes, attention needs to be focused on the relational, affective, and cognitive mechanisms that take place within protest events themselves. The search for invariant determinants has to be accompanied by the identification of causal mechanisms, that I define as categories of action that filter structural conditions and produce effects (see della Porta 2013). Following Tilly (2001), I conceptualize mechanisms as relatively abstract patterns of action that can travel from one episode to the next, explaining how a cause creates a consequence in a given context. I would not restrict capacity of action to individuals, however, instead including collective actors. I will in fact consider mechanisms as a concatenation of generative events linking macro causes (such as contextual transformation) to aggregated effects (for example, cycles of protest) through individual and/or organizational agents. In this way, I believe that the search for mechanisms helps in combining attention to structure and to agency.

Looking at mechanisms, my approach is *relational*, as it locates eventful democratization in the interactions of various institutional and non-institutional actors; *constructivist*, as it takes into account not only the external opportunities and constraints, but also the social construction of their experiential reality by the various actors participating in social and political conflicts; and *emergent*, as it recognizes that democratization from below involves the capacity of events to change structures (della Porta 2013). Cognitive and affective processes intervene in the mobilization, contributing to define the situation as well as forging solidarities and identities.

First, I suggest looking at democratization events as transformative, insofar as they alter the cultural meanings or signification of political and social categories and fundamentally shape people's collective loyalties and actions (Sewell 1990). They are settings in which one sees better the structural

influences, but also 'the spectacle-like quality of the event makes it an important site of cultural transactions at which national identities are potentially formed' (Beissinger 2007, 22). The contention intrinsic to the event is strongly constitutive of identities (Beissinger 2007, 23). As Jeffrey Alexander noted, 'Social dramas, unlike theatrical ones, are open-ended and contingent. They can be staged, but nobody is certain whether the actors will arrive, who they will be, how events will unfold, which side will win a confrontation, and what the drama's effects on the audience will be' (2011, 36).

Eventful Democratization as Theoretical Challenge

Protest campaigns linked to episodes of democratization often appear as sudden and unexpected. Tocqueville's statement about the French revolution applies well to democratization from below: 'never was any such event, stemming from factors so far back in the past, so inevitable yet so completely unforeseen' (1955, 1). Surprise clearly applied to 1989. As Giuseppe Di Palma noted that 'before the demise of communism made the front pages around the world, few if any of the revisionist students of communism were betting on it' (1991, 52). Not only were Western scholars stunned, but the sudden change surprised East European dissidents as well: for instance, as late as the end of 1988, Czech dissident Vaclav Havel had expected the opposition to remain 'for the time being merely the seed of something that will bear fruit in the dim and distant future'. According to an opinion poll conducted a few months after the transition, only five per cent answered affirmatively to the question 'A year ago did you expect such a peaceful revolution?' (cit. in Kuran 1991, 10–11). Surprise was also widely mentioned with regard to the Arab Spring, as 'the vast majority of academic specialists on the Arab world were as surprised as everyone else by the upheavals that toppled two Arab leaders last winter and now threaten several others' (Gause III 2011, 81). In the public opinion, as well, incredulity for the rebellion followed on expectations of immobility. As the Egyptian one, also 'The Tunisian revolution has clearly constituted a real political surprise inside as well as outside the country. No specialist, observer or politician, Tunisian or non Tunisian, really predicted this revolution, either for Tunisia or for any other country of the region' (Ayeb 2011, 467).

Paradoxically, however, surprise at extraordinary events is often accompanied by interpretations that stress their unavoidability. As Kuran noted, 'While the collapse of the post-World War II political order of Eastern Europe stunned the world, in retrospect it appears as the inevitable consequence of a multitude of factors. In each of the six countries the leadership was generally despised, lofty economic promises remained unfulfilled, and freedoms taken for granted elsewhere existed only on paper'. The question to address is therefore,

'if the revolution was indeed inevitable, why was it not foreseen? Why did people overlook signs that are clearly visible after the fact?' (Kuran 1991, 12–13). In order to explain this paradox, Kuran cites the individual's tendency to select information consistent with a dominant interpretative model, so that what does not fit the dominant view is temporarily removed when the regimes are still stable, and then acquires visibility when regimes fail. Besides this cognitive trap, however, there is also the inherently undetermined nature of these processes, which are indeed unpredictable as they develop in action.

What is important, then, is that events suddenly start to fuel themselves, as action produces action. Protest events tend to cluster in time, as 'events and the contention over identity which they represent are not distributed randomly over time and space. Their appearance is structured both temporally and spatially' (Beissinger 2002, 16). In fact, protests come in chains, series, waves, cycles, and tides, 'forming a punctuated history of heightened challenges and relative stability' (Beissinger 2002, 16).

Explanations for this clustering have been offered at the micro, individual level, looking in particular, within game theoretical perspectives, at the demonstrative effects of protest. As Kitschelt summarized, 'In game-theoretic language, people begin to redefine the payoff matrix of participation in collective action from that of a prisoner's dilemma in which individual participation is costly and counter-productive to that of a coordination or even an assurance game in which individuals' incentives to contribute and collective benefits reinforce each other in a virtuous circle' (Kitschelt 1993, 416).

Within this type of approach, Kuran (1991) has interestingly suggested that—as 'mass discontent does not necessarily generate a popular uprising against the political status quo'—in order to explain conditions 'under which individuals will display antagonism toward the regime under which they live', one must consider the distinction between public and private preferences. In Kuran's account, each individual has personal views on the government that do not necessarily overlap with his or her position in public. While private preferences are considered as fixed, the decision to express them in public is influenced by a calculation of the risks involved in that choice (1991, 17). So, when the dissidents in Eastern Europe were few, they enjoyed private but not public support, as people who shared their preferences did not want to risk expressing them and even resented the courage of the dissidents. As Havel noted, open defiance was then considered 'as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society' (cit. in Kuran 1991, 30). According to this approach, protest is expected to spread when particular conditions make less risky the public expression of oppositional preferences that have been held in private. The payoff for publically expressing dissent increases with the size of the dissenting masses, which reduces the cost of expressing the private preferences as others do so. Not only repression is

more difficult the more are the people who withdraw their support for the system, but the intrinsic benefits of participation increase with the social circle of recognition that would approve it. Thus, a sort of revolutionary bandwagon derives from the contemporary fall in thresholds and rise in public opposition. As public opposition increases, it becomes easier to convince those with private preferences against the government to mobilize, but also to change the preference of others.

Going beyond the individual level, the analysis of eventful democratization I want to articulate in this chapter points at the power of action itself in creating and recreating environmental opportunities and organizational resources that influence the strategic interactions of various actors. If events fuel each other, it is because they are linked 'in the narrative of the struggles that accompany them, in the altered expectations that they generate about subsequent possibilities to contest; in the changes that they evoke in the behaviour of those forces that uphold a given order, and in the transformed landscape of meaning that events at times fashion' (Beissinger 2002, 17). If structural conditions are not (or do not seem) ripe, they might still mature during protest campaigns. That is, protest campaigns are eventful, as they produce new relations and resources that favour mobilization, rather than being a simple product of external and internal conditions.

In this analysis, I stress the emergent nature of protest. Notwithstanding the relevance of protest events for social movements, they have been mainly studied as aggregated collective action (for example, in protest cycles). In social movement studies, in fact, protest has mainly been considered as a 'dependent variable' and explained on the basis of political opportunities and organizational resources.

In my conception of eventful democratization, I share the focus on the internal dynamics and transformative capacity of protest, looking however at a broader range of events than those included under the label of transformative protest. My assumption is that protest events have cognitive, affective, and relational impacts on the very actors that carry them out. Some forms of action or specific campaigns have a particularly high degree of eventfulness. Through these events, participants experiment with new tactics, send signals about the possibility of collective action, create feelings of solidarity, and consolidate organizational networks, while sometimes public outrage at repression develops. In fact, protest develops in eventful democratization through some specific cognitive, affective, and relational mechanisms.

From the cognitive point of view, I stress mechanisms of growth in discursive generality and politicization as they develop in action. By *growth in discursive generality* I mean the cognitive expansion of protest claims, from more specific to more general concerns, as a way to bridge different constituencies. For instance, Foweraker and Landman (1997, 13) have observed the way in which claims develop in action, as in protest campaigns, which start

with specific claims and then move towards the call for a broader set of rights. In fact, rights have high symbolic power. Not only are they conquered through struggles, but the discourse on rights is effective in bonding collective demands. In the long history of social movements in Latin America, 'participants learn their right lessons through the rigor of organization and the debates over strategy, so learning the language of rights' in action (Foweraker and Landman 1997, 33). There, liberalization processes have usually been prompted by mobilization on various rights: social movements have, indeed, been catalysts for change. Similarly, protests against the construction of big infrastructures often start from circumscribed concerns with the defence of the local environment, but then expand their discourses from Nimby ('not in my back yard') to Nope ('not on planet earth'), while ecological claims are bridged with claims of justice (della Porta and Piazza 2008).

Together with the growth in generality, there is a mechanism of *politicization of the protest discourse*, as the target of action is singled out in the government and the regime. While waves of protest might start with specific complaints against economic decline or diffuse corruption, protest gains momentum especially when a cognitive link is made between these grievances and government actions. In social movement studies, this attribution of political responsibility has often been noted as a characteristic of very different types of protest, from labour strikes to ethnic riots.

Cognitive mechanisms are paralleled by emotional ones, such as moral shocks, but also feelings of collective empowerment. Scholars of social movements have compiled lists of emotions relevant for research, in recognition that 'Social movements are awash in emotions. Anger, fear, envy, guilt, pity, shame, awe, passion, and other feelings play a part either in the formation of social movements, in their relations with their targets . . . and in the life of potential recruits and members' (Kemper 2001, 58). *Moral shocks* are emotionally intense reactions of indignation against an action perceived as ethically unbearable, and thus alter ways of thinking (Gould 2004). Research on protest in authoritarian regimes has in fact stressed how episodes of brutal repression might increase rather than quell opposition, as they are perceived as outrageous by the population. They do facilitate mobilization in authoritarian regimes through the transformation of fear into rage.

As negative emotions must be balanced by positive ones in order to fuel collective action, moral shocks must be accompanied by a *feeling of collective empowerment*, as a set of positive emotions that produce an enhanced sense of agency through identity building and solidarity ties. While the breakdown approach to social movements tended to consider emotions as negative and social movement activists as carriers of those negative emotions (for example, frustration, aggression, and so on), recent research has pointed out the relevance of additional emotions—negative, but also positive (such as joy, pride, pleasure,

and love)—for understanding social movement dynamics. Emotional liberation has been considered as important in explaining the development of protest, especially in risky forms of activism (Flam 2005). Reciprocal emotions (positive ones such as love and loyalty) have especially important effects on movement dynamics.

Cognitive and affective mechanisms fuel relational ones, which take shape during eventful democratization. In various ways, coordination reduces the cost of participation as mobilization spreads: this emerges, in fact, in *networked* and *aggregated* forms. In his analysis of recent anti-austerity protests, Jeff Juris has distinguished these two forms of coordination, noting that 'whereas the use of listservs and websites in the movements for global justice during the late 1990s and 2000s helped to generate and diffuse distributed networking logics, in the #Occupy movements social media have contributed to powerful logics of aggregation' (2012, 260–61). While the logic of networking aims at connecting diverse collective actors, the logic of aggregation involves the assembling of diverse individuals in physical spaces. This distinction applies also to eventful democratization, where the two forms of coordination interact. As Osa (2003) noted, in Poland, waves of protest for democracy proceeded by bridging various groups, so that coordination was, at the same time, a precondition and an effect of mobilization. Eventually, it is the very definition of a collective actor which is at stake

Eventful Democratization: A Summary

Eventful democratization appears as sudden and unexpected, not only to observers or dictators, but also often to the very activists who mobilize against the authoritarian regimes. This difficulty in prediction is linked to agency and contingency: intense protest events are indeed under-determined moments as structural constraints are, if not overcome, at least weakened by the very capacity of mobilization to quickly transform relations. As Kurzman suggested in his analysis of the Iranian revolution, estimations of participation cannot be known in advance as 'they shift drastically from moment to moment on the basis of amorphous rumours, heightened emotions, and conflicting senses of duty' (Kurzman 2004, 170).

Although under different external conditions, similar causal mechanisms were at work in the days of eventful democratization in the Czechoslovakia, GDR, Egypt and Tunisia. As mentioned, previous literature has stressed changes in individual preferences, or better, in the propensity to express them in public. In Kuran's account, the East European regimes were more vulnerable than they seemed, as 'Millions were prepared to stand up in defiance if ever they sensed that this was sufficiently safe. The people's solidarity with their

leaders would then have been exposed as illusory, stripping the veneer of legitimacy from the communist monopoly on power'. The development of the events then also shifted the preferences of those who supported the regime in private, but with increasing doubts. In a similar analysis, Karl Opp and his collaborators suggested that political events themselves changed the structure of incentives due to increasing dissatisfaction and perceived political influence, plus social incentives. So, "an increase in protest may therefore have caused many individuals who hadn't protested before to view action as a 'must' " (Opp, Voss, and Gern 1995, 195).

Following the social movement literature, I have instead looked at causal mechanisms at the collective level. From the point of view of relational mechanisms, coordination (more structured but also less so) occurred in action, linked to the daily needs of the mobilization itself. In action, cognitive mechanisms developed also: there was, here as well, a growth in generality of the claims and a politicization of the discourse. Emotional mechanisms were also at work, intensifying positive ties of solidarity among protestors, and transforming fear into rage.

Indeed, these reflections point at the role of agency as the necessary complement of structures. If protests in eventful temporality change the structure of relations, this does not mean that contextual characteristics are not important in influencing the timing and fate of the mobilization for democracy. As Craig Calhoun observed in his analysis of the 1989 protests in China, 'Underlying conditions make a movement possible, but they do not make the movement happen . . . movements are products of human action . . . the action in social movements consists also of choices made in the heat of struggle, decisions made on the run' (1994, 19). In 1989, as during the Arab Spring, what has been called a relational process of subversion developed, made up of various sequences of multi-sector mobilization and political fluidity (Bennani-Chraibi and Fillieule 2012).

REFERENCES

ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. 2011. *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

ARENDT, Hannah. 1963. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company.

AYEB, Habib. 2011. Social and Political Geography of the Tunisian Revolution: The Alfa Grass Revolution, *Review of African Political Economy*, *38*(129): 467–79.

BEISSINGER, Mark R. 2002. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BEISSINGER, Mark R. (2007) 'Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions', *Perspectives on Politics*, *5*: 259–76.

BENNANI-CHRAIBI, Mounia & FILLIEULE, Olivier. 2012. Pour une sociologie des situations révolutionnaires, *Revue française de science politique*, *62*(5): 767–96.

CALHOUN, Craig (1994) *Neither Gods, nor Emperors*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

DELLA PORTA, Donatella. 2008. Eventful Protests, Global Conflicts, *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, *17*: 27–56.

DELLA PORTA, Donatella. 2013b. *Clandestine Political Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DELLA PORTA, Donatella. 2014. *Mobilizing for Democracy: Comparing 1989 and 2011*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DELLA PORTA, Donatella & PIAZZA, Gianni. 2008. *Voices of the Valley. Voices of the Straits: How Protest Creates Community*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.

DI PALMA, Giuseppe. 1991. Legitimation from the Top to Civil Society: Politico-Cultural Change in Eastern Europe, *World Politics*, *44*(1): 49–80.

FLAM, Helena. 2005. 'Emotions' Map: A Research Agenda. In *Emotions and Social Movements*. eds. Helena Flam and Debra King, 19-41. London: Routledge.

FOWERAKER, Joe, & LANDMAN, Todd. 1997. *Citizenship Rights and Social Movements: A Comparative and Statistical Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GAUSE III, F. Gregory. 2011. Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring? , *Foreign Affairs*, July-August.

GOULD, Deborah B. 2004. Passionate Political Processes: Bringing Emotions Back into the Study of Social Movements. In *Rethinking Social Movements*. eds. Jeff Goodwin and James J. Jasper, 155-175. Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield.

JURIS, Jeffrey S. 2012. Reflections on Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Spaces, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation, *American Ethnologist*, *39*(2): 259–79.

KEMPER, Theodore. 2001. A Structural Approach to Social Movement Emotions. In *Passionate Politics. Emotions and Social Movements*. eds. Jeffrey Goodwin, James J. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, 58-73. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

KITSCHELT, Herbert. 1993. Comparative Historical Research and Rational Choice Theory: The Case of Transitions to Democracy, *Theory and Society*, *22*(3): 413–42.

KURAN, Timur. 1991. Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989, *World Politics*, *44*(1): 7–48.

KURZMAN, Charles. 2004. *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

O'DONNELL, Guillermo A., and Schmitter, Philippe C. (1986) *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

OPP, Karl-Dieter, VOSS, Peter, and GERN, Christiane. 1995. *Origins of a Spontaneous Revolution: East Germany, 1989*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

OSA, Maryjane. 2003. Networks in Opposition: Linking Organizations Through Activists in the Polish People's Republic. In *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action, eds.* Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, 77-104. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SEWELL, William H. (1990) 'Collective Violence and Collective Loyalties in France: Why the French Revolution Made a Difference', *Politics and Society*, *18*: 527–52.

SEWELL, William H. 1996. Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology, In *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terence J. McDonald, 245-280. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

TILLY, Charles. 2001. Mechanisms in Political Science, *Annual Review of Political Science*, *4:* 1–41.

TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de. 1955 (original 1856) *The Old Regime and The Revolution*. New York: Anchor Books.